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Eternal Vigilance: The Price of Preservation

Robert Gamble

Note: edited excerpts of a talk by Robert Gamble, Senior Architectural Historian, Alabama Historical Commission, for the 25th anniversary of the Twickenham National Register Historic District.

Since my childhood, Huntsville and especially this neighborhood have always held a special nostalgia for me. Huntsville was a sleepy little place then. But it was always exciting when my mother and grandmother brought me over here with them from our home in Decatur to shop. Crossing the Tennessee River bridge, we motored along narrow old highway 20 to Mooresville. There, we took a sharp left and continued on through other drowsy villages—Belle Mina, Greenbrier, Madison—zigzagging around spreading cotton fields until we finally saw the clock tower of the old Courthouse rising above the trees on the Huntsville square (fig. 1).

Usually we headed out Randolph Street meandering by old houses set back on shady lawns. The whole feel of the place was one of intimacy and contentment, of security and civilized repose. No doubt many of you have similar recollections—if not of old Huntsville, then of somewhere else. Such memories contribute to our sense of identity, locating us in time and space. This is because we are molded not just by gene pools and the faces that surrounded us in early life, but also by the places that envelop us. Subtly they, too, sculpt our values and outlook on life.

We can no longer take for granted such friendly, meaningful environments. The Huntsville of my childhood, with its old churches and graceful antebellum homes, its old mill villages, its courthouse square and Big Spring—all nestled against the green skirts of Monte Sano Mountain—had evolved slowly and pretty much unselfconsciously into the town I knew in the early 1950s.

Huntsville's venerable, inviting neighborhoods were essentially an unanticipated by-product of the town's history. They were so integral a part of everyday life that we took them for granted and assumed they would always be there.

Around 1970, I returned to Huntsville after a long absence from Alabama. I was stunned; the place was booming. But at what a price! Urban renewal had blitzed a great swath of old Huntsville southwest and east of the courthouse square, indiscriminately pulling down whole streets full of houses. I was reminded of bombed-out areas I had seen in some European cities. Abingdon Place has just been leveled for a Boys' Club field; famous Cotton Factors' Row along with the old tree-clad Courthouse were gone (fig. 2). Replacing them was a seeming avalanche of concrete and steel and shiny big windows. It all looked more cosmopolitan more big city. But was it necessarily better? Certainly the friendly human scale was gone.

It also looked as if the Twickenham neighborhood, too, might be on the edge of extinction—doomed to be nibbled from the edges by creeping blight, along with more and more asphalt parking lots. I wondered if the people in Huntsville had prostrated themselves before some kind of golden calf of progress. I thought, "Pretty soon, good old Huntsville is going to look like everywhere else." Well, thankfully I was wrong about Huntsville. What I didn't realize was that a number of Huntsvillians were already concerned about the way things were going and were working to reverse a trend that threatened to erase the personality and appeal of the old part of the city.

We all know the rest of the story. Standing here more than 25 years later, we're surrounded by the magnificent results. Despite some tragic early architectural losses that shouldn't be minimized, good sense prevailed. Thanks to dedicated people like Frances Roberts, Harvie Jones, Catherine Gilliam, and others. Wonderful landmarks like the old depot were saved; and in 1973 the Twickenham neighborhood became one of Alabama's first National Register historic districts. Twickenham is probably one of the most desirable vintage residential districts anywhere in the Southeast.

Twickenham is also one of the few historic residential areas that hasn't lost its friendly link with the old downtown business area. Residential and business streets merge seamlessly and gracefully into one another. You can still take a relaxed stroll from the Square into homey neighborhoods full of pretty homes: no used car lots, no abandoned houses, no littered vacant lots. Once people assumed that you should be able to walk to school or to work or even go home for



Fig. 2 View of new Huntsville-Madison County Courthouse, under construction.

Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

lunch. However, the common-sense notion of pedestrian-friendly streets and easy access to schools, stores, offices, and places of worship has gotten lost in the pell-mell sprawl of the automobile-dependent suburbs.

Fortunately, some urban planners are beginning to take an appreciative second look at places like Twickenham and old downtown Huntsville and to learn a few lessons. Here planners find an easy mix of activities that don't force anyone to drive everywhere. Children may be able to walk to school, and you may go home for lunch now and then. Past and present also live comfortably together, adding up to real quality of life.

I'm also fascinated by the sheer architectural diversity all around Huntsville. No other urban landscape in the state offers such a living textbook of American architectural history: delicate Federal-period fanlight doorways, stately Greek Revival porticoes, Romanesque belfries, Gothic spires, fussy Italianate brackets, pointed Queen Anne-style turrets, 1920s "stock-broker Tudor," and finally a smattering of early modern architecture. It's all here—in big houses and little ones, stores and schools, churches. Taken together, the history and architecture of Twickenham and old Huntsville become a fantastic window through which at times we not only can glimpse, but also almost touch the past.

This beautiful, historic, and romantic environment is also fragile. You have done a marvelous job in protecting and enhancing it in the last 25 years, but you cannot afford to rest on your laurels—not now, not ever. Living in a wonderful setting like Huntsville brings with it the responsibility of caring for it. Remain alert. Change is inevitable, but change must be managed intelligently if it is to be in a positive direction and if cherished qualities of "place" and "environment" are not to be gradually destroyed.

In the first place, a neighborhood can only lose so many landmark buildings before it has irreparably lost its historical character. Never forget that nice old buildings are a limited and nonrenewable resource. In 1973, about 50 pre-Civil War buildings still stood in the Twickenham Historic District. Today several are gone. Most were neither large buildings nor major landmarks; nevertheless, they contributed to the ambience of Twickenham. As Harvie Jones once remarked, losing one or two landmarks every few years may not seem like much, but over 20 or 30 years, the numbers mount up especially if you have only 50 to start with. What authentic old buildings we manage to leave for our great great grandchildren to learn from and to love in their turn will depend upon how vigilant we are right now.

Of course landmarks are going to be lost in spite of everything we do. The question then becomes what supplants them. And will the replacement enhance or diminish the overall character of the surrounding area? I can imagine instances when actual reconstruction of a lost landmark might be justified. But in most cases, sensitive and compatible new design may be the preferable course of action.

Likewise, if trees are cut or sidewalks replaced or even if traffic patterns are altered, what may be the long range impact on the “feel” of a neighborhood and its quality of life? We who love mellow towns and neighborhoods like this ≡also with our planners and our civic leaders≡need to cultivate the mindset of the chess player instead of the poker player. We have to anticipate long range consequences and not be deluded by short term gain. We must remain organized, vigilant, involved, informed, far-seeing, and, yes, reasonable.

We can take heart from what John Kenneth Galbraith has observed: “Preservationists are the only people history invariably proves right.” It does seem true that preservationists often perceive both future benefits and pitfalls more accurately than do those enthusiastic town boosters who focus only upon the short term reward. The more informed the public is about the positive facts, the virtues of historic preservation, its capacity to enrich lives in so many ways, the more allies preservationists have. Preservation does not have to compete with progress; preservation **is** progress. Some one once put it very well: “Preservation is not blind opposition to progress, but rather opposition to blind progress!”

We who believe in the long term public and civic benefit of safeguarding areas like Twickenham or, for that matter, open spaces or natural areas or Civil War battlefields, must educate, educate, educate: our children, our neighbors, the business community, land developers, legislators, and ourselves. Teaching our fellow citizens and the decision makers in our communities to see with new eyes is the foundation of our educational task if the places we love, not just our old downtown neighborhoods and streetscapes, but also our beautiful rural landscapes, are to survive.

A critical mass of citizens must become aware of what is special about the places we revere: their history, their architecture, their culture, and their natural beauty. A wholesome, informed pride of place can be a very effective instrument, indeed, both to safeguard and to enhance our vintage neighborhoods. And those who care need to know about and be able to use the legal and planning tools we have to direct change beneficially while retaining a community’s sense of its specialness≡past *with* present.

At the same time, we preservationists must keep our perspective. We cannot lose sight of the big picture. Thankfully we've moved beyond the time when historic preservation was seen largely as the attempt of eccentrics to save a few *historical shrines*. I'm troubled when too many erstwhile local preservationists will get involved only when there's an immediate threat to their own bailiwick and simply bow out when the struggle moves elsewhere or when larger but equally important issues such as overall government preservation policies are at stake.

Every human is entitled to at least the choice for a decent, wholesome environment, whether one happens to live in a working class neighborhood or on "Silk Stocking Row," in an urban setting, or in rural America. A vibrant and rejuvenated old mill village where people feel good about their surroundings and hence better about themselves should be a cause of rejoicing for all of us.

We cannot afford to retreat into privileged residential enclaves and divorce ourselves from the larger issues of community betterment. Wise and positive manipulation of the *built* environment is critical—both those beautiful built environments like Twickenham that we've inherited as well as those we ourselves would create. It is critical if we humans are to maintain a civilized quality of life, one that nourishes rather than impoverishes the human spirit.

We begin the task right here, with people like you, and in beautiful of towns and neighborhoods like this. You've done wonderfully here in Huntsville so far. Your accomplishments of the last two decades inspire me.

With the privilege of living in this beautiful setting, in this beautiful old town, comes the responsibility to understand it and thus to maintain it, so that those who come after us may also learn from such a place, and to love it in their own turn. That is your task, your charge as you look toward the next 25 years.

Bob Gamble, Senior Architectural Historian for the Alabama Historical Commission, is the author of two major works on the state's architecture: The Alabama Catalog and Historic Architecture in Alabama (for complete citations, see page 17).